

RKM

Columbia University  
in the City of New York

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25 April 1985

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR Emeritus  
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Dear Annie,

As you may remember, we first met soon after your arrival on Spaceship Earth, back in 1974. There you were at your house in Palo Alto, cuddled in the loving arms of your loving mother and grinning at the benign gaze of your equally loving father. It was then that your (self-appointed) Aunt Harriet and Uncle Bob arrived. At once, you shifted your wide-eyed attention to the newcomers. You evidently decided that they were acceptable and greeted them with the first of the warm Annie-smiles that have periodically cheered us up ever since. At once, we concluded that we were in the presence of a deep-seeing young woman. That conclusion has since been confirmed, times without number.

And now you have outdone even yourself. For in a note dated April 22nd, 1985 -- not so incidentally, the hallowed publication date of The Vicennial Edition of OTSOG -- your father writes me:

"Annie (sic) has pointed out to me that  
the dwarf's eyes do not surmount the  
giant's."

That keen observation, dear Annie, makes you perceptive beyond all the hundreds of others who have spoken or written to me about OTSOG in the course of the past twenty years. Not one of them -- not a solitary one -- has noted that the cover has the little man's eye-level situated well below that of the giant's, even though the dwarf is firmly perched on the giant's shoulder. Not Ellen Raskin who designed the cover art; not any of OTSOG's editors; not the publisher who urged a new edition. And -- be it confessed -- not the author himself. None of these looked knowingly enough to see what you saw at once. You and you alone have given such evidence of a truly perceptive eye, which in this case, swiftly scanned, assessed, and made us all the beneficiaries of your candid perception. Never again shall I look upon the cover of OTSOG in the same, partly unseeing fashion as before. You have changed that, once and for all. And I thank you for my newly instructed eye.

I've been puzzling about this and think that perhaps we have here -- in this case of the dwarf plainly not positioned so as to see farther than the giant on whose shoulder he stands (maybe that's why he wears a rather grumpy expression) -- is a

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"fruitful error." As your mother and father may have had occasion to remark to you, not all errors are unproductive. After all, Columbus thought that he was sailing west directly to the Indies (near Japan) and instead, as we like to say, he discovered America. Actually, the long history of science is punctuated with fruitful errors. (That is the subject of another of the books I'll not get round to writing although I find it a rather interesting pattern. By the way, you might ask your father one day whether mutations in the course of biological development can be usefully thought of as errors, some of which turn out to be 'useful.')

Anyway, I suspect that, in noting the eye-levels of giant and dwarf on the cover of OTSOG, you may have come upon an error which might also turn out to be fruitful. That it is an error you have shown beyond a reasonable doubt. I now explore with you the possibility that it might be a fruitful error (albeit on a distinctly small scale). Some day perhaps, you will bring yourself to read in the pages of OTSOG. You will then find that quite a lot of people, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, didn't take to the idea that one can in truth see farther simply by standing on the shoulders of giants, and surely not if one were dwarf-like in mind and spirit. These conservative skeptics didn't believe much in Progress. They defended the giant-like Ancients as permanently superior to the presumptuous, dwarf-like Moderns. As it happens, I don't go along with those total rejectors of the idea of any progress at all. Still, we might take the artwork on the cover of OTSOG as an attempt to signal today's Moderns: do not assume that we who stand on the shoulders of prior accumulated knowledge and culture necessarily and inevitably see farther. Do not assume that Progress is certain and easily accomplished. In other words, the error might provide a sort of parable.

That's the best I can manage, off the cuff, in pondering the question raised by your deep- and swift-seeing eye which, like William Harvey's, is "full of spirit" (though unlike his, decidedly not "round [and] very black").\* Let's continue to muse about what must henceforth be known as "Annie's Question." One of these days someone may find a way of coming upon a reasonable answer to it. Meanwhile, what do you think of my first hypothetical observation?

With gratitude, and with pleasure that it was you, and not any other, who came upon the Otsogian Enigma.

With avuncular love, as always

*Uncle Bob*

\* I have this description of the great Harvey's eye, and many another eye of the time, from my good, 17th-century friend, John Aubrey. Should you want to learn of the other eyes, just glance at OTSOG, pages 17-2

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